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SPECIFIC GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS: OTHER VULNERABLE GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

Written statement*/ submitted by North-South XXI, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 December 2000]

*/ This written statement is issued, unedited, as received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Groups and individuals: Other vulnerable groups and individuals

Lebanon

1. After twenty-two years of illegally occupying approximately 10 per cent of Lebanese territory, Israel has withdrawn its forces from most of southern Lebanon. However, scattered throughout the hundreds of towns and villages that comprised the occupied land are thousands and thousands of landmines. United Nations experts believe that there are at least 130,000 mines, booby traps and unexploded ordnance scattered on the hills of southern Lebanon. The exact location of most of these hidden weapons remains unknown. They include anti-personnel mines, anti-tank mines, booby traps, roadside bombs and unexploded ordnance.

2. The presence of landmines and unexploded weaponry threatening civilians throughout Lebanon today is largely the result of the 1975-1990 civil war and the Israeli occupation of the southern part of the country, although some of the mine fields date back to the French Mandate and World War II. The vast majority of the estimated 130,000 mines were, however, laid by Israeli forces in the last two decades. It has recently been revealed that those forces laid mines on top of the old mine fields. Israeli-planted landmines are not confined to the areas previously occupied. The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) sent patrols through United Nations peace-keeping lines to plant booby-traps close to the Litani River, an area consisting in part of arable land and farmland.

3. Around every artillery position or military outpost previously occupied by the Israeli IDF or SLA lie acres of ordnance waiting to explode. The problem of unexploded ordnance alone poses a grave threat to local populations, particularly in the south where artillery and other ordnance rained on villages for two decades. This problem is also not confined to the south. In the Bekaa Valley, the Lebanese Army estimates that approximately eleven tons of mines and unexploded ordnance are scattered in a seventy square kilometer area inhabited by 20,000 people. That area, much of which is farmland, is highly contaminated with cluster bombs.

4. Civilians are being killed and injured, and increasingly so, as they return to the liberated areas to reclaim their homes. Many of the victims are children. In the six months following the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon, at least 11 civilians were killed and 56 injured from landmines in the south. The social impact of this threat is devastating. Farmland can not be used safely, and convincing villagers of the danger and keeping them off farmland is a tremendous challenge. In a country as small as Lebanon, the civilian dependence on farmland for subsistence is critical.

5. The clearing of mines and unexploded ordnance is a large and urgent task. While UNIFIL peacekeeping troops are currently charged with the task, their mandate is restricted to clearing the areas in which UNIFIL operates. Specifically, their priority is to clear roads leading to UNIFIL positions along the border, in order for their troops to operate safely. Although they do respond to civilian needs whenever possible, the priority is not to make the land safe for civilians in general. Demining for civilian safety and civilian land use is a task left largely up to the Lebanese Army. The Lebanese Army has neither the technical ability nor the resources to manage the

problem. Experts who have observed the procedures of the Lebanese Army conclude that their demining procedures are not always conducted in accordance with international standards for humanitarian mine clearance. This has resulted in a high rate of deminer casualties. An additional obstacle to effective demining and neutralizing of ordnance is the fact that those engaged in the effort do not possess necessary information about the weaponry. Some of this information is classified by the governments that sell the ordnance or mines, including the United States.

6. UNIFIL officials state openly that the international assistance to Lebanon is not enough, and that an additional battalion should be requested to assist in the effort. According to UNIFIL officials, at the current rate of clearance, it will take approximately 37 years to clear Lebanese land of mines. In Bosnian, for example, which is the greatest recipient of international demining assistance, only a few kilometers can be cleared a year because mine clearance is an expensive and arduous task. The international assistance to Lebanon is minimal by comparison. The terrain of Lebanon presents a particularly difficult challenge to clearing mines. The rocky mountainous terrain hampers clearance efforts and increases the costs of demining. Many minefields are unmarked and unknown minefields are still suspected to exist. To date even known minefields have not been fenced off to prevent civilians from further injury. Returning civilians are unaware of the threat and the location of dangerous areas. This problem is complicating the return of displaced people and hindering long-term reconstruction and socio-economic development in those areas.

7. While the Israeli Defense Force provided UNIFIL with maps of some of the mines, the majority remain unmarked. The process of verifying the accuracy of the maps is a lengthy one. Moreover, there are many conflicting reports about the cooperation of Israel in the removal of these mines. Recent press reports indicate that Israel has turned over faulty maps to the United Nations with regard to the location of mines. Other reports indicate that while the maps indicate minefields, they do not contain information about the actual number or location of the mines within the fields. Additionally, press reports indicate that Israel is attempting to swap landmine location maps for prisoners. The compelling of Israel's cooperation in this effort is imperative for humanitarian reasons.

Our Recommendations to the Commission:

8. We request that the Commission recognize and treat the situation of landmines and unexploded ordnance in Lebanon as a humanitarian crisis;

9. We request that the Commission pressure Israel to cooperate in the effort. Specifically, that the Commission to compel Israel, in whatever ways possible, to produce complete and precise information regarding the location, numbers and types of mines it planted in Lebanon;

10. We request that the Commission pressure the United States as well other countries that have supplied the weaponry now threatening the civilian population to provide specific technical assistance to Lebanon with regard to render-safe procedures for their weaponry;

11. We request that the Commission encourage the relevant branches of the United Nations to commit more resources and technical assistance to the overall demining effort, not merely for the safety of the operation of its troops in Lebanon, but for the safety of civilians and their use of the land.